THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY
Isaiah 55, I Corinthians 13
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There is a story from the shadowy history of God's people which is a delight in its poetic innocence, and profound in its theological integrity. It is found in the 33rd Chapter of the Book of Exodus. For thirteen chapters or so God and Moses have been engaging in far reaching conversations on Mt. Sinai. Moses has received the foundation of the law and covenant, has carried the two tablets of stone down the mountain to discover the people worshipping a golden calf. After breaking the tablets, Moses returns to the mountain for a continuation of the conversation and a simple request of God, "...You have told me to lead these people...You have said that You know me and are pleased with me...Now, if You are, tell me your plans." God responds, "I will go with you, and I will give you the victory."

That wasn't the question, and so he tries again, and gets an equally evasive answer from the Lord. Moses, however, is not easily put off. A third time, emphatically: "Please, let me see the dazzling light of your presence." And then he gets an answer of sorts. "I will let my splendor pass before you and in your presence I will pronounce my sacred name...but I will not let you see my face." And then this wonderful little vignette - "...here is a place beside me where you can stand on a rock. When the dazzling light of my presence passes by, I will put you in an opening in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take my hand away, and you will see my back, but not my face."

Poor Moses. All he wanted was a little certainty. He simply wanted to see who it was he was following. He wanted to be sure before he proceeded into the wilderness at the head of that long column of griping, complaining Israelites, on the way to a promised land they had never seen. But it wasn't to be. No face-to-face encounters with this God. Moses would have to settle for God from the back side, an oblique theology, a burning bush, two tablets of stone, a voice that was maddeningly silent when he wanted to hear it, an image seen through a glass, darkly, as one of his latter day legacies would put it.

There is in religion an almost irresistable tendency to reduce the infinite to finite terms, because finite terms are the only terms finite minds can comprehend. The scholars call that tendency anthropomorphism: it means, simply, making God look like a human being. It can be seen in art; from the magnificent Buddahs of Thailand to the God of creation stretched across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In religion it can be observed in the all too human antics of the Greek deities, whose behavior approximates a kind of unearthy soap opera, or even the soaring, but still terribly human, rhetoric of the Westminster Divines; "There is but one only living and true God,, invisible...immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible"..etc., etc., etc. - as if the magnificence of God's being could be contained in a list of superlatives.

There is in religion an almost irresistable tendency to reduce the infinite to the finite. But in Judeo/Christian religion there is contrary direction. You don't get to see God's face - "My ways are not your ways...as the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts," is the way the prophet wrote it. Every time the disciples thought they fully understood, Jesus would do something that totally mystified them. There is an essential tension in our religion between God who comes to dwell among His people, who cares about their mundane affairs, who becomes one of them ultimately, and God high in the heavnes, God of creation, the "mysterium tremendum", the God who, if you see at all, it's through a glass, darkly, never face to face.

Time was, not very long ago, that mystery was out. We told ourselves that we had pushed the frontiers of the unknown out of sight: that learning had eliminated superstition, magic, mystery and a lot of religion at the same time. We thought we knew about all there was to know. Scholars were actually saying that we had discovered all there was to be discovered about our world and universe. The function of the academic enterprise was to tidy up, tie up the loose ends, catalog the data and pass it on to the next generation. That process began with the enlightenment, and has proceeded into the modern era. "Glory be to man", Swinburne wrote, to document what had happened to old-fashioned obsolete religion. The transcendent disappeared and it was only a matter of time till God died, an event acknowledged publicly in this culture in 1966. The word for that is "secularism" and it means simply living without any sense of God, an ultimate, a transcendent. It is what the scholars say has happened to us. And yet, we live with transcendent realities, or at least transcendent questions which are not resolved by secular answers. The stuff of your life and mine is loving, yearning, hoping, stretching, suffering, doubting, despairing, praying, dying. There may be no place for transcendent, ultimate realities in our culture, but at deep personal levels, where we deal with fear and anger over injustice, where our hearts cry out when loved ones die, you and I confront something more than secularism. Charles Shulz captures that dynamic in his Peanuts cartoons with regularity. Charlie Brown keeps yearning for the Great Pumpkin, the ultimate baseball game, the perfect place kick.

The church responded to secularism very curiously. Some parts of the church reacted defensively, angrily - defiantly protected by a whole fortress of dogmas and customs straight out of the last century. And some of the church, acknowledging secularism - decided that smart money would be on relevance. We might not have anything transcendent to say, but at least we could be with it. Ernest Campbell, formerly of Riverside Church, New York quips, "...it is human nature to retreat from the mysterious to the manageable...It is easier to plan a rummage sale than it is to stand before a burning bush." (E. Campbell's Notebook, Spring 1981).

In liturgy, too, we have tried to respond to the secularism of the world with relevance. Roman Catholic scholar, Frederick Parella, wrote an essay in last week's Christian Century, about worship. He had been to a Methodist service and loved the hymns. He wrote, "'Father, all glorious, O'er all victorious, Come and reign over us, Ancient of days.' How splendid an image: Ancient of days. I have heard very little like it in church for two decades. What I have heard instead are choruses such as 'Be like the sun and shine on everyone;'sentiments more attuned to'Mr. Roger's neighborhood' or 'Sesame Street'than to an act of divine worship.". (Christian Century, 10/7/81, p. 989).

The church responded to secularism by trying desperately to be relevant, essentially abandoning the transcendent. And in the process we got too cozy with God. We tried to do the same thing Moses asked for - to reduce God to our terms, to see His face.

Something is happening, however, to call us back from our obsession with secular relevance. Surprisingly, it is happening, not in the book-lined studies of the theologians, nor in the prayerful cloisters of monks, but in the laboratory of the modern scientist. It is called the knowledge explosion and it is the most exciting, hopeful, and dangerous development in the human story in centuries.

Suddenly, in the relatively short period of several decades, everything we thought we had nailed down, has come loose. Suddenly it looks like life is a

lot older than we thought, the universe larger and expanding more rapidly. Quantum physics, relativity, nuclear power, miniatorization in the circuity of data processing, computers, robots, silicone chips...We are standing on the edge of something incredible and one of the more incredible dimensions of it all is the return of the transcendent. Suddenly the infinite God makes more sense. Suddenly, confronted with the thought of an infinite number of galaxies all expanding simultaneously at the speed of light, the ancient rhetoric - "My ways are not your ways" sounds up-to-date.

Someone asked the Futurist scholar, gadfly Herman Kahn if he believed in God. Kahn responded: "I was an atheist at 12, at 20 an agnostic, at 30 I became a deist. The way things are going I'll soon be a rabbi."

The prototype person of the future is Buckminister Fuller; scholar, man of letters, architect, visionary. He was asked by Futurist Magazine recently if he believed in God. This is the fascinating account. "To answer he discarded all dogma. He asked if he, personally, had had direct experience that required him to assume a 'greater intellect' than that of humans to be operative in the universe. The answer was a resounding yes. He discovered the operation of a plurality of physical laws, like a train of gears. If there is design in the universe, there must be an intellignet designer." (The Futurist, 6/81, p.32).

If we can't see God face to face, what evidence is there that He exists? Fuller finds it in the design of the universe. I do too. I was utterly intrigued to discover in Hans Kung's work on the subject, a fresh emphasis on the old dilemma of Moses. Professor Kung wants us to understand that God is rarely, if ever, confronted head-on, as it were. It's always, in his slightly convoluted German, God from the back side. "It is in retrospect that we can know and understand in faith... Believing, I can perceive in my life, with all its twists and turns, a dispensation, perhaps even a guding power." (Does God Exist? p.654). "It is only afterward that I can see what had been the deeper meaning from the beginning."

It was later, I believe, that Moses read God into the story. It was in retrospect that he knew God's deep involvement in the burning bush, and law and Exodus. As you think about this - and we do think about it a lot, may I suggest that you and I can see God in retrospect as we look back over our own histories. And may I suggest a place where the evidence of God is compelling, although we don't often recognize it there? It is, truly, through a glass, darkly. I refer to our yearning for God, itself; the yearning captured in the lovely 84th Psalm:

> My soul longs, yea, faints
> for the courts of the Lord
> My heart and flesh sing for joy
> to the living God.

Or these beautifully insightful observations from Joseph Sittler:

> "There is a precision born of knowledge: the clear, joyous precision of the insider who lives completely with the faith. And there is the other precision: the precision begotten of deprivation, the tormented precision of vision without gift. There are persons in the Christian tradition who have described the reality...because they stood outside longingly looking in with tormented precision." (Grace Notes, p.55).

Did you ever read an account of how human beings react to sustained, serious hunger? I recall a book about the survivors of a plane accident in the

remote Andes. They thought about food, compulsively, obsessively. They described favorite dishes, they concocted marvelous menus, they listed and ranked every restaurant. When they realized the torment they were inflicting on themselves they agreed to stop. Then the fantasies and dreams began. They dreamt of oranges and milk shakes and bakeries with biscuits and rolls and buns...

Our relationship with God is like that. Our yearning is real. It has not diminished an iota over the long pull, it cannot be argued out of us, nor educated out of us, nor legislated out of us, nor tortured out of us. Perhaps, the grandest failure in all of human history is the Marxist attempt at official atheism. It hasn't worked. It never worked. It didn't work in Russia where you have to stand in line for a place at worship on Easter. It didn't work in Poland obviously, nor Czechoslovakia, nor East Germany. It didn;t even work in China where the church today is back in business.

The yearning is real. Few people in history have been as sure of themselves as St. Paul. He was utterly confident in the love of God in Jesus Christ. He volunteered to die early in order to be with the Lord and he wrote some of the most stirring theological rhetoric in history. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, persecution, famine, sword? No! In all these we are more than conquerors through him that loved us."

But can you detect the poignant yearning in this?..."Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been understood."

In this life we will not see as clearly as we want to see. It will always be through a dark glass, or from an angle. But there is always the world, the perfectly designed world which upon occasion opens a new window through which we see momentarily new beauty, truth, love and know that we have seen God...Voyager 2, for instance, passing Saturn at 54,000 mph and sending back the sounds of the space craft crossing the shock bow of the planet, like a ship plowing through choppy water; sounds which the newspapers reported, were like "the ringing of unearthly church bells, deep gongs with higher peals rising and falling as the craft moved through the fluctuating waves." (Columbus Citizen Journal, 8/26/81).

We may never see clearly. But there is the world and the mystery of that wide universe out there, and a man, who lived and loved and died for us. There is the magnificent mystery called the cross. And until that day when you and I see face to face, it is enough.

Amen.

God eternal, grant us courage to live by incomplete knowledge, by image through darkened glass. Keep us from oversimplifying everything. Give us the strength to live with doubt and uncertainty. Love us, stand with us, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.